

Marshall Woods House  
62 Prospect Street, southwest corner of  
Prospect and Meeting Streets  
Providence  
Providence County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-222

HABS  
RI,  
4-PROV,  
122-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

## MARSHALL WOODS HOUSE

Address: 62 Prospect Street, southwest corner of Prospect and Meeting Streets, Providence, Providence County, Rhode Island.

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RI,  
4-PROV,  
122-

Present Owner: Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

Present Occupant and Use: Not in use.

Brief Statement of Significance: This is one of the largest houses in Providence, built in the 1860's, and designed by Richard Upjohn.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Built for Marshall Woods, in the Woods family until 1931, then acquired by Senator and Mrs. Peter Gerry who owned it until 1959 when it was bought by the present owners.
2. Date of erection: 1860-1864
3. Architect: Richard Upjohn.
4. Sources of information: Anita F. Glass, Early Victorian Domestic Architecture on College Hill (unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Art, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 1960), pp. 27-33.  
John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), p. 140.

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: The following information on Marshall Woods, the original owner, was prepared by Margaret Fletcher for the Providence Preservation Society, March 19, 1962:

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, November 1824 - died July 13, 1899 in London, England.

He was the only son of Dr. Alva and Almira (Marshall) Woods. His education was in the private schools of Providence and he graduated from Brown University in the class of 1845 and received his M.D. in 1848 from the University of the City of New York. He did not practice medicine but mostly gave his time to Brown University, becoming a trustee in 1856 and a senior member of the corporation in 1892. He was treasurer of the University from 1866 to 1882.

In 1855 he was sent to the Paris Exposition and was made a member of the fine arts jury. He received the French Legion of Honor in 1855.

His wife was Anne Brown Francis, daughter of Governor John Brown Francis. They had two children, Mrs. S. A. B. Abbott of Boston, and John Carter Brown Woods of Providence. Mrs. Woods died August 24, 1896. [compiled from: Marshall Woods' obituary in the Rhode Island Historical Society, Scrap book, vol. 9, pp. 29-30; and Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society, vol. VIII, no. 1 (April, 1900), p. 59.]

- C. Supplemental Material: The following, prepared by Antoinette F. Downing, is copied from Providence Preservation Society, Second Street Festival, Sixth May, 1960 (a guide booklet), p. 28:

The house at 62 Prospect Street was built for Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Woods between the years of 1860 and 1863 by Richard Upjohn, architect, of New York. It was owned by the Woods family until 1931, when it was acquired by Senator and Mrs. Peter Gerry. The Rhode Island School of Design bought the house and land in 1959.

Built in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance in accordance with other buildings being designed by Upjohn during this period, it affords an interesting contrast with such irregular, assymetrical and heavily trimmed buildings as his Edward King House, now the People's Library, built in Newport in 1838, some twenty-two years earlier. The simplicity of detail, the continuing horizontal lines of belt courses and the swell of the curving bay emphasize the mass of walls, executed in the hard red Philadelphia brick, which gives the dense surface needed to complete the effect. The severity of the building, essentially a smooth, almost square form, is diminished on the east by the full high curved bay, on the south by the porte cochere, and on the west, which Mr. Woods considered the front of the house, by a one-story Renaissance arcaded porch or piazza extending almost the full width of the building. The structure is covered with a low hipped roof with a wide, shadowy overhang. The trim is of sandstone, and the flat belt courses carry unbroken lines around the corners of the building. The slightly arched French windows have cast iron grilles at the base and the caps found in other Upjohn buildings of about this date.

The main entry, on the east, leads into a circular hallway with stair hall at the right, and main reception rooms running at right angles north and south across the middle of the house. The interior finish is reserved, almost severe, with paneling finished in walnut and with simply designed light colored marble mantel pieces.

Through the courtesy of Mrs. Gilbert Glass, copies of letters written to Mr. Upjohn by Mr. and Mrs. Woods and by several of the builders have been made available for study. They not only definitely date the building of the house, but throw light on some of the problems and requirements of the prospective householder. The letters show that most of the lumber came from Bangor, Maine, the facing brick came from Philadelphia, and many of the workmen, particularly the masons, were sent on from New York. The problems of getting the bruck in time, maintaining the quality of workmanship, and keeping the workmen contented are discussed throughout the entire correspondence.

On September 28, Mrs. Woods wrote that she wished to "see the plans for the inside of the house--particularly the mouldings of the doors and the paneling of the staircase and entry."

On October 6, Mr. Woods wrote "I shall soon go to work on the barn and stable plans. I wish I had decided to put window seats in the south windows of the reception room and of the south parlour, having there short French windows. Can it be done now?"

On November 1, the master builder, Mr. Riker, wrote to ask about the piazza, "How does the arch finish againt the main wall,--on a corbel or an antae?"

And two years later, in May of 1862, Mr. Calder, another workman, wrote asking about the height of the dado of the staircase. "Shall it be higher that the handrail or the same height?"

In April of 1863 the Woods were in their new house, and Mr. Woods wrote that they must have blinds.

In July he wrote that the blinds were in, and he wanted to settle his account. The architect's commission was 5 percent of the whole cost of building. Upjohn had finished yet another of several important commissions in Providence.

The following is copied from Anita F. Glass, Early Victorian Domestic Architecture on College Hill (unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Art, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 1960):

From September, 1860, until February, 1864, Marshall Woods wrote at least thirty letters to Richard Upjohn regarding the many anxieties he endured and the details he concerned himself with while building his mansion on Prospect Street. The house shows the result of the thought, time and workmanship that went into its construction. Built of hard-surfaced,

but warm-toned brick, beautifully set, it commands its site and was a suitable mansion for a well-to-do nineteenth century merchant. Whereas the front of the George Street houses [also designed by Upjohn] express the feeling of a crisply delineated facade, the Marshall Woods house has a three-dimensional quality. The projecting bay seems to extrude physically from the tightly banded solid mass. The simplicity of detail expresses the strength of the walls. The string courses, besides indicating the vast proportions of the interior space, accentuate the horizontality of the structure. Upjohn emphasized this by the rectangular windows on the third floor and by the deliberate folds of the cap roof. The whole surface is brittle and sharp. Even the force of the projecting bay is controlled by a crisply turned angle, which separates it from the main mass. Upjohn's labels are the only ornamentation beside the string courses. Their strong modelling not only articulates the windows, but casts bold shadows over the hard surface. As in all of Upjohn's houses which have been discussed, the brackets, practically invisible here, are a finishing touch to the cornice and do not express themselves as a structure. However, the interior plan does assert itself here on the exterior. The irregular placement of the windows between the bay and the right wing show the rise of the staircase.

The Woods house presents a closed front to the street, but it opens up on the other three sides. On the north, there is a wing containing the offices (kitchen, pantry, etc.), on the south an arched porte-cochere, and on the west, which Marshall Woods calls the front, is a terrace with a Florentine arcade and balcony overlooking an Italian garden which slopes down the hill. The terrace was an important adjunct to a house built in the picturesque style. [Alexander Jackson] Downing says that "as an object of taste, the terrace is universally admired, because it serves to connect, by a gradual transition, so highly artificial an object as an architectural dwelling with the more simple forms of natural objects around." In the Woods house, however, Upjohn's terrace rises formally above the landscape, rather than mingling with it.

We know that the house was already begun on September 4, 1860, because Marshall Woods informed Upjohn that the timbers had not yet arrived. He did not use what was available locally, but ordered the best materials possible and so subjected himself to a great deal of aggravation. On September 6th, he wrote that

"The beams are ready at Bangor to be shipped today,  
and they hope today to find a vessel for Providence.

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There was yesterday a false hope raised that the Philadelphia brick had arrived--Now here is the trouble. I do not like the walls to go up separately. I should like to have face and backing up done nearly at the same time as men can work together, and I want you to write to Denman & Co. who if I remember are the finishers of the brick and find out the exact condition. I want you furthermore to caution O'Connor about the walls being carried up too high in the middle before they commence the front brick. Look out well for this."

His concern for every construction detail is illustrated in a letter of September 8, 1860, in which he asks questions about the tying together of the beams:

"The 'Beams are to be tied together where they meet with pieces of plank' say the specifications of the carpenter. This evidently refers to each beam, but as I wrote yesterday, I fear the wooden connection and substituted iron.-----These anchors are so important as regards springing of the floor that I request your close attention to it. Telegraph whether the anchors are to go on each beam where it meets together."

Marshall Woods' desire for quality and perfection caused him to complain again and again to Upjohn. On September 10th, he wrote:

"Mr. O'Connor's work goes on as well as it can with a few workmen. I keep from this day an exact statement of progress of the house and number of his hands (masons) and it will be well for him to bring us masters. But I wish you would see that he sends on men of whom he knows the work. This is necessary for today we have had to block two or three entire sets of timbers because the workmen had not levelled properly. The blocking was 1-1/4" to 1-1/2". He must have men who are good as masons and whom he knows. These are the men I insist upon having and if he does not give them I shall give such a protest as will interfere with the payments, even though it may be, as would be the case, much against my desire. He cannot give good work with poor men. You understand this - I say this for you only, not for him as I do not wish to discourage him at all. However, you will be on here this week I suppose and we can talk over the work a little more critically however than when you were here before, since I am more disposed to be exacting having been so worried for the last fortnight. You do not say one word about the Philadelphia Brick. Where are they? When did they leave? On what vessel? Name of Captain?"

Unfortunately, we do not have Upjohn's answers to these letters but he must have come to Providence to satisfy Mr. Woods. But things did not run smoothly for long. On September 14th, on his return to New York, Upjohn received the following letter:

"Since you were here last night, I have been called upon by the gang of Philadelphia brick layers. They said that they were out of work and that Mr. O'Connor was not willing to allow them the same wages for rough brick till the face brick arrives. That they would not work without the rough brick that their money was getting exhausted and they must go home. I replied that while I would not interfere between Morrell and his workmen, I thought that I can arrange the extra half a dollar a day for the men (4 in number), meaning to pay it myself. They seemed I thought from what the foreman said satisfied but they soon returned and the foreman said that he had been deceived by Mr. O'Connor as to the character of the brick work. That they would not do the work and then left to go to New York. Morrell has gone down to see them and if they go you will before this receive a telegraph to send on more men. If Mr. O'Connor does not do so we must stop and he will not do so unless you say in a most decided manner that he must. The bricks are expected from minute to minute and we ought to have all here ready to go to work as soon as one cart load of brick arrives on the ground. It is these detestable small savings of a 25 cent piece here and there which seem to threaten the success of the job. I depend therefore upon you to arrange for the immediate replacement of this refractory subcontractor, for he is the subcontractor of O'Connor, O'Connor having let out the job to him and thus putting me at the mercy of any drunken workman among the gang who refuse to obey orders and makes his fellows follow suit by sympathy. The subcontractor did not impress me favorably and the next man YOU BETTER SEE YOURSELF."

We learn on September 15th that the brick finally did arrive but "the schooner started with 71,000 bricks and before she arrived threw overboard, on account of bad weather, say 4000, netting 65,000 with those injured in packing." The troubles with the brick layers continued daily and, on September 26th, a letter from Mrs. Woods informs Upjohn that Mr. Woods is confined to his bed. She does not mention his illness, but he was definitely under a strain from his continual anxieties. Mrs. Woods reminds Upjohn "that it is nearly October and we have snow and ice in this climate early and only a few weeks are left to fulfill your promise of covering the roof in. Do see that more men are sent on."

In spite of Mr. Woods' worries, the house apparently progressed on schedule, for, on October 8th, Upjohn received a letter saying "there is a misunderstanding in regard to the west side string course on the main building. It laps over the floor of the balcony and roof of the Piazza.", and, on October 9th, we learn that "the wall is now 9 feet up." On October 24th Mr. Woods would like to have the plan of the slating "as the roof is to be finished" and he thinks "That the porch ought if possible to go up this Autumn for two reasons - 1st that it will aid in the closing up of the work here sooner than if delayed to Spring and 2nd that it will improve the front of the house which now to my eye is, as I expressed my fears originally, rude and weak."

The same detailed care went into the planning of the interior of the house and it took much much longer to complete the work. On September 28, 1860, Mr. Woods "is desirous of seeing the plans for the inside finish of the house before they are finally decided upon. Certain matters are left in doubt, particularly the moulding of the doors and the panneling of the stair case in the entry." On October 6th, he is regretting his decision not to put window seats in the south windows of the reception room and south parlor. He wants to know if it can still be done. "You generally arrive at a result and wish you would propose a plan to use by which I can do it - provided you see no strong objection." Apparently this was not accomplished. A few days later he reminds Upjohn that, on the first story, all the door frames and doors of the main building were to be arched. The inside work dragged on. In December of 1861, Mr. Riker wrote to Upjohn that not a door was hung yet, and in May of 1862 Mr. Calder "wishes to know what is to be the height of the dado of the stair case. Shall it be higher than the hand rail or of the same height?" It wasn't until February of 1864 that Marshall Woods and Richard Upjohn finished their final accounting.

The interior of the house reveals the time and care that Marshall Woods devoted to its details. The anchors must have been strong enough, for the floors have not sprung. As he wished, the door frames are arched and the finest materials are used throughout. The richly carved dado gives a plastic quality to the stair wall. But it is mainly Upjohn's superb sense of proportion which makes the interior outstanding. Unlike the mansions of the forties and fifties, Upjohn does not adhere to a rectangular plan. The door opens into a circular entry, which leads into a great hall running the length of the house. The magnificent stairway which was a central feature of the Edward King house is placed at the side front and the main living rooms open from the long side of the hall. The large reception room faces west and opens out onto the porch and terrace. Richard Upjohn's design and Marshall Woods' care produced a mansion of grace and elegance.



PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This is a very large brick house, designed by Richard Upjohn and built during the 1860's, and characteristic of Upjohn's work during this period.
2. Condition of fabric: Good

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Main block, approximately rectangular, about 65' wide east front, 75' deep, three stories high; north wing, three stories but not as high, about 30' x 45'. Front divided into four unequal bays, steps in and out, with projecting, curved center bay.
2. Foundations: Brownstone ashlar
3. Wall construction: Smooth brick, running bond, narrow mortar joints. Slightly projecting, unmolded brownstone belt courses, brownstone door and window trim.
4. Porches: Wood porch on west garden front, at center of house, one story, Corinthian arcade three bays wide.
5. Chimneys: Brick, three inside chimneys in main block.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Main entrance with heavy brownstone frame with scrolled keystone, segmental arched head, elaborate carved and paneled double doors. One-story carriage entrance porch on south side with brownstone semicircular round arches. French doors on west front to terrace and porch. Service entrance on north.
  - b. Windows and shutters: French windows, with segmental arched heads on first two floors. Brownstone labels. Upper two floors have wrought iron railings in the windows.
7. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: Hip, slate.
  - b. Eaves: Open eaves, with shaped rafter ends.
  - c. Dormer, cupolas: None

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Main entrance in curved bay at center of east front leads to oval entrance hall, entrance hall leads to wide central hall running the length of the main block north and south, porte cochere open off south end of central hall, dining room at northwest corner, large reception room at center and south end of west side, smaller parlor or library at southeast, stairhall at northeast, closets, toilets, etc. around entrance hall and stairway; five large bedrooms with dressing rooms and bathrooms on both second and third floors; kitchens and service rooms on first floor of north wing, servants' rooms on second and third floors; storerooms, laundry and furnace room in cellar; terrace and porch on west side of house open from dining room and large reception room on ground floor, and from second floor west bedrooms on balcony level.
2. Stairways: Grand main stairway at northeast corner of main block, U-shape, open well, to third floor. 14" treads, 5-1/2" risers, heavy molded and carved railing, heavy paneled wainscoting.
3. Flooring: Patterned hardwood floors survive in most rooms, some later tile and linoleum, patterned marble tile floor in entrance hall, some original brick floors in cellar.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster walls and ceilings in most rooms.
5. Doorways and doors: Heavy, paneled double doors to principal rooms on first floor; large six-panel doors with heavy moldings on upper floors. Heavy molded architraves on doors.
6. Trim: Molded and carved wood trim, painted on upper floors, natural finished walnut trim on first floor, except in southeast room which has birds-eye maple doors, doorways, windows, interior window shutters and mantel. Heavy plaster ceiling cornices.
7. Hardware: Butt hinges, mortise locks, silver plated hardware in principal rooms, some hollow glass knobs silvered on inside.
8. Lighting: Electric
9. Heating: Central. Fireplaces in all principal rooms of main block, with simple, one-story, light colored, marble mantels.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: House at southwest corner of Prospect and Meeting Streets, faces east on a large lot that slopes down at the west rear, house set back from sidewalk on north and east.
2. Enclosures: Wrought iron fence on brick foundation with brick posts around north and east sides.
3. Walks, driveways: Present entrance drive to front door a later alteration.
4. Landscaping: Semiformal garden on east and south sides of house in run-down condition

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect  
National Park Service  
April 1962